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Irene Viparelli

Universidade de Évora - Portugal, viparelli1@gmail.com

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IRENE VIPARELLI

Reflecting on the Limits of Marxian Topography with Althusser and Negri

Translated from Italian by Katherine M. Clifton

1. Introduction

The international conjuncture of the 1960s, dominated by the political effects of the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, represented a specific theoretical-political context that undoubtedly provided, for Negri as for Althusser, the necessary condition of a theoretical elaboration: “to destalinise Marx” through a critical re-reading of fundamental texts appeared to them both the only possible way to renew the revolutionary power of Marxist theory. Such an abstract “heterodox need,” however, provided an absolutely inadequate basis for a comparison between the two authors: Negri’s “Italian workerist Marx” of the primacy of the productive forces over the relations of production appeared to oppose on all fronts Althusser’s “structuralist Marx,” the scientist of a history *sans sujet*.¹

By 1968, the struggles for national liberation, the emergence of new antagonistic subjects and the parallel marginalization of the traditional working class, had radicalized the “heterodox attitude,” transforming the question of the “destalinization of Marx” into the more general problem of the “crisis of Marxism.” During this historical-political and theoretical period from the 1960s to the 1970s, the perception of the theoretical opposition between Negri and Althusser unexpectedly faded, creating the space for a possible encounter.

This essay, starting from the specific question of the insufficiencies of the Marxian topography, will try to show that between the two theoretical *dispositifs* there is a relation of “proximity in difference.” On the one hand, both

¹ On Workerism see Adagio, Cerrato and Urso 1999; Borio, Pozzi and Roggero 2005; Trotta and Milana 2008; Wright 2002; Corradi 2011; Turchetto 2001. On the various phases of Negri’s militancy in those years see Serrante 2012; Negri 2007 and 2009.

authors come to see an “ontological breakthrough” as the only way to re-found revolutionary theory. On the other, their different views of historical temporality impose two contrasting “ontological solutions.” In the conclusion, I will present the hypothesis that there exists an “aporetical complementarity” between the two theoretical proposals, a privileged ground on which to extend the comparison of the two ontological proposals – aleatory materialism versus constituent ontology – formulated by the two authors in the early 1980s.

2. Althusser

2.1 *The political and ideological limits of Marx*

At the end of the 1970s, Althusser, faithful to the view already presented in *Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses*, recognized in the conception of superstructure, specifically the divergence between the notions of political and ideological representation, Marx’s two fundamental theoretical limits.

In relation to the “political” limit, Marx, according to Althusser, *‘was paralysed* by the bourgeois representation of the State, of politics, etc., to the point where it became merely a negative form (the criticism of its juridical nature),² and therefore capable only of uncritically emphasizing the fundamental principles of bourgeois juridical ideology: the separation of civil society and State on the one hand, and the identification of State and politics on the other.

Just as Marx conscientiously presented *Capital* as ‘a critical analysis of political economy’, so we must realize the objective that it was not able to attain: a *critical analysis of politics*, as it is imposed by the ideological conception and the practice of bourgeois politics.³

² Althusser 1998, p. 286.

³ Althusser 1998, p. 287.

Althusser developed this “critical analysis of politics” in the lengthy manuscript of 1978, *Marx in his Limits* starting with a review of the fundamental definitions of the state and above all its separateness by Marx and Lenin:

Separate from what? That is the whole question. ‘Separate from society’? ... I think we must say that if the state is ‘separate’ for Marx and Lenin, it is in the narrow sense of ‘*separate from class struggle*’. ... If I affirm that the state is separate from the class struggle (which unfolds in the realm of production–exploitation, in the political apparatuses and the ideological apparatuses) because that is *what it is made for*, *made to be separate from the class struggle*, that is because the state needs this separation in order to be able to intervene in the class struggle ‘on all fronts’.⁴

The definition of the State as a reality separate from class struggle, according to Althusser, clarifies both the theories of Marx and Lenin on “separateness”, giving the state a non-ideological meaning and the equally obscure definition of the State as “an instrument” of the dominant class. Only inasmuch as it is a reality separate from the class struggle can the State fulfil its task of protecting the interests of the dominant class, setting itself apart from both the class struggle and the internal oppositions of the dominant class itself.

This theory of “separateness”, however, far from overcoming the problem of the State, fails to specify the dynamic through which the State, as a separate entity, intervenes in the class struggle. Althusser therefore considers a third definition, formulated by Lenin during the Sverdlovsk conference on the State in 1919 (“the State is a special machine”), trying to explain the meaning of “machine” through a philological analysis:

The state is a machine in the full, precise sense of that term, as established in the nineteenth century after the discovery of the

⁴ Althusser 2006, pp. 69-71.

steam engine, the electro–magnetic machine, and so on: that is to say, in the sense of a *man–made device* [*dispositif*] comprising a *motor* driven by an energy 1, plus a *transmission* system, the purpose of the whole being to transform a specific kind of energy (A) into another specific kind of energy (B).⁵

The State, therefore, is a “machine” because its specific task is to transform energy. Consequently, in relation to energy B, that is the energy resulting from the transformation, the State defines itself as *machine à pouvoir*:

*The greater part of the state’s activity consists in producing legal power, that is, laws, decrees and ordinances. The rest of it consists in monitoring their application by the agents of inspectorates.*⁶

With reference to the driving force, or energy A, the State defines itself as *machine à force* or as *machine à violence*: the energy that allows the State to operate is precisely ‘the Force or Violence of class struggle, the Force or Violence that has “not yet” been transformed into Power, that has not been transformed into laws and rights [*droit*]’.⁷

In effect, Althusser explains, it is not the force and the violence of the class struggle *tout court*, but the excess of force used by one class on another, the “difference in conflictual force” between the classes. This is above all the reason that the force of the dominant class is represented by the State.

The final purpose of this process of the transformation of violence into power is, according to Althusser, the removal of original violence, of the antagonistic nucleus of the capitalist mode of production.

Just as Marx said that ‘the tailor disappears in the costume’ (the tailor and all the energy that he expended cutting and sewing), so the whole hinterworld of the confrontation of forces and violence, *the worst forms of violence of class struggle, disappear in their one*

⁵ Althusser 2006, p. 105.

⁶ Althusser 2006, p. 107.

⁷ Althusser 2006, p. 108.

*and only resultant: the Force of the dominant class, which does not even appear as what it is – the excess of its own force over the force of the dominated classes – but as Force tout court. And it is this Force or Violence which is subsequently transformed into power by the state–machine.*⁸

Only by virtue of this power of mystification, only thanks to the removal of the antagonism, will the State manage to complete its historical task: to guarantee both the reproduction of capitalist relations of production and the reproduction of itself as “an instrument” of the dominant class.

Althusser thus arrives at a new, fresh definition of the State:

*It is ‘the circle of the reproduction of the state in its functions as an instrument for the reproduction of the conditions of production, hence of exploitation, hence of the conditions of existence of the domination of the exploiting class’ which constitutes, in and of itself, the supreme objective mystification.*⁹

The definition of the state as the “supreme objective mystification” allows Althusser to displace the analysis of the state on the ideological plane as a “critique of fetishism.”

As he himself noted in fact the concept of “objective mystification” was used by Marx in volume I of *Capital* to indicate the fetishistic character of the “commodity form” which endows the social relations between men the mystified form of a relation between things: A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own

⁸ Althusser 2006, p. 109.

⁹ Althusser 2006, p. 126.

labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour».¹⁰

This exclusively economic and therefore abstract representation of the concept of “objective mystification” is for Althusser the ultimate expression of Marx’s inability to free himself from ‘categories of the law or in the notions of juridical ideology.’¹¹

Having developed the theory of commodity fetishism in the first chapter of the *Capital*, and therefore starting from a single assumption about the theory of the value, in effect forced Marx, in the absence of concrete categories, to implicitly assume the principles of the bourgeois juridical ideology.

The paradox is that Marx opposes relations between men to relations between things, whereas the reality of the law itself describes these relations in their unity. ... For as long as we remain the prisoners of a conceptual system based on the opposition person/thing, the two basic categories of law and juridical ideology, we can just as easily defend Marx’s position as its opposite, or adopt both positions, or even reject both.¹²

A completely materialist theory of fetishism can only start from the concrete conditions of the mystification, presupposing therefore the class struggle on the one hand and the existence of the State on the other. Based on this assumption, commodity fetishism appears to be a moment in the more general theory of ideology, as enunciated in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. In its positive function, inasmuch as it is ‘an objective reality “in

¹⁰ Marx, 1909.

¹¹ Althusser 2006, p. 128-129.

¹² Althusser 2006, p. 128.

which” men – here, social classes, but also the individuals in these classes – “become conscious” of their class conflict “and fight it out,”¹³ ideology is a fundamental moment of the class struggle; in its negative sense, because it is the ideology of the dominant class incarnated in the State, ideology is rather the power of mystification, the power to remove class violence, fetishism.¹⁴

Therefore, the definition of the state as “supreme objective mystification”, allows Althusser in the first place to separate the reflections on the state from politics: far from being “the place of politics”, the State is rather the place of the “mystification of politics”; the reality of a *prodigious operation of political deletion, amnesia and removal*.¹⁵

In the second place, this definition allows us, through a materialist and non-ideological reading of “fetishism,” to recognize the fundamental nucleus of the critique of the state: the social relations between persons are presented as a relation between things, not abstractly, but materially and concretely in the way the state gives the antagonistic relation between classes the “juridical-ideological” form of the harmonious relations between persons and in this way guarantees the reproduction of capitalist relations of production..

The separation of the state and the political and the parallel movement of the theory of the state on the ideological terrain necessarily leaves one problem unresolved: what is a “genuinely materialist theory of the political?”

An important tendency is currently appearing, to take politics out of its bourgeois juridical status. The old distinction party/trade

¹³ Althusser 2006, p. 136.

¹⁴ On the twofold statute of ideology in Althusser see Lazarus 1993, pp. 16-7; Balibar 1991, pp. 56-61.

¹⁵ Althusser 1998, pp. 481-82.

union has been sorely tried, totally unforeseen political initiatives are born outside the political parties and the workers' movement (ecology, feminism, young people's protests, etc.) in a great confused mass, certainly, but which could be fecund. The 'generalized politicization' ... is a symptom that must be interpreted as undermining, at times savage but profound, of the classic bourgeois forms of politics.¹⁶

"Politics," then, definitively abandoning the constitutive doublet of bourgeois juridical ideology, freed from the mystification conferred upon it by its "juridical status, loses the appearance of transcendence and discovers itself as a synonym of antagonism, of widespread resistance at every social level.

2.2 *A new Topography*

Marx's "ideological limit" is also an expression of his inability to extricate himself from the 'categories of the law [and] the notions of juridical ideology'.¹⁷

This excursus on the limits of the Marxian concept of the "superstructure" highlights a new topography, which preserves very little of the earlier Marxian formulation. Structure and superstructure no longer, in fact, indicate in any way the presumed separation/primacy of the economy with respect to politics and to the ideological, but rather two different ways for the economic, the political and the ideological to exist. Inasmuch as they are structural elements, the economic, political and ideological relations are presented as relationships of power, antagonistic relationships, and class struggle. Inasmuch as they are superstructural factors, functions of social reproduction, the same elements are presented in a mystified form, as an expression of the domination of class. In short, the doublet "structure-production," in the Althusserian *dispositif* no longer indicates the place of the

¹⁶ Althusser 1998, p. 289.

¹⁷ Althusser 2006, pp. 128-29.

dialectic relationship between capital and wage-labour but rather the antagonistic nucleus of capitalist society; the class struggle that occurs in the relationships of production-exploitation, in the political and ideological systems. “Superstructure-reproduction,” at the same time, no longer represent the subordinate place of politics and ideology, but rather, the mystifying power of the State that makes the process of reproduction of the relationships of capitalistic exploitation possible.

In this “new topography,” the relation between the structure and the superstructure appears to be reversed: ‘The process of production must in turn, (lest it remain abstract) be conceived as a decisive moment in the process of reproduction.’¹⁸ It is no longer the relationship of capital and wage-labour, but the power of “objective mystification” of the State that, in the final instance, represents the former and founds the productive power; the *conditio sine qua non* of the production and reproduction of capitalist society.

3. Negri

3.1. *The dissolution of the capitalistic dialectic*

One can thus paradoxically say, while in *Capital* the categories are generally modelled on private and competitive capital, in the *Grundrisse* they are modelled on a tendential scheme of *social capital*.¹⁹

The superiority of the *Grundrisse* with respect to *Capital* is, in Negri’s opinion, due to the “anticipatory force;” namely the capacity to go *beyond* the limits of his time, *beyond* the “private” and competitive capital still dominant in the second half of the nineteenth century on the one hand and *beyond* the limited organizational form of the workers’ movement on the other. The

¹⁸ Althusser 2006, pp. 43-4. See also Guillaume 1976, pp. 99-104.

¹⁹ Negri 1991, p. 27.

Grundrisse, in short, follows the tendency of the capital, structuring the analysis on the assumption of the “crisis of the Planner-State;” that is from the point of view of the crisis of the form taken by capital between 1917 and the early 1970s.

In fact, for Negri, the October Revolution was the origin of a new capitalist era, based on a new logic of development.

From now on, theories of the state would have to take into account more than simply the problems involved in the further socialisation of exploitation. They would have to come to terms with a working class that had achieved political identity, and had become a historical protagonist in its own right. ... At every level of capitalist organisation there was now a deeper, more threatening and contradictory presence of the working class: a class that was now autonomous and politically consistent.²⁰

The Planner-State, which associates the planning of production and policies for the redistribution of wealth, represents the capital that, now aware of the historical metamorphosis that has occurred, recognizes antagonism as a moment that cannot be eliminated from its existence and therefore attempts to transform it into the principle propulsive force of development.

This Keynesian project (later Schumpeterian) of the “dynamic equilibrium” between the opposing class interests, however, must necessarily reveal itself, according to Negri, intimately and essentially contradictory:

The capacity that capital possesses to absorb productive forces is purely historical – Marx would say ‘fortuitous’ – that is, not endowed with a rational force, but ‘irrational’, there where the antagonism which characterizes the formation of the relation is inclined to breakage, scission, explosion.²¹

²⁰ Negri 1988, p. 5.

²¹ Negri 1991, p. 73.

The proletarian subject, by virtue of its essential exteriority to capitalist development, continually frustrates the attempts to integrate the working class into the development plan of capital, transforming the “reformist measures” of capital into revolutionary weapons: the “dynamic equilibrium” between the classes becomes a terrain for the permanent expansion of the movement of the self-valorisation of class. In this way, following the traditional interpretation of Italian Workerism, for Negri, the class struggle of the working masses progressively subtracts wages from every “capitalistic measure”, transforming it first into an “independent variable”, autonomous with respect to the logic of profit and depending on the political force of the workers’ subjectivity, and then into a ‘radical obstacle to development,’²² into an element of the dissolution of the principles of the Planner-State:

Stagflation shatters the reformist dream with its accumulation of mechanisms of stagnation (that is, levelling-out of the rate of profit) and inflation pressures, wage pressures, demands for appropriation of gross profit made by the new mass of proletarians reunited as a subject that is productive and potentially subversive in equal measure.²³

The overriding political determination of wages, producing a continual increase in the fraction of necessary labour, completely cancels profit margins, historically realizing the law of the “tendential fall in the rate of profit”, dissolving the conditions of valorisation on capital and, with them, the historical function, the essential need, of the capitalist relationships of production.

The definitive dissolution of the reformist principles on which the Planner-State was built, imposed, during the 1970s, a new, radical metamorphism of the capital: once again, as in 1929, it was necessary to

²² Negri 2005, p. 66.

²³ Negri 2005, p. 67.

establish new principles of valorisation and thus refound the conditions of existence of the capital.

The first and fundamental condition for the historical persistence of capital in the absence of objective conditions for its valorisation is, for Negri, the transformation of the capital into “command;”

Now, when the historical crisis of class relations reaches its climax, the logic of command must try to express itself alone. *By production of commodities by means of command we mean that every relation between value and price, between production and circulation, fails.*²⁴

When the absoluteness of the “proletarian refusal” cancels the historical conditions of the dialectical bond, the class relationship is transformed into an eminently political relationship between antagonistic subjectivity, that is in a relation of power, while the command becomes the new, fresh condition for capitalist valorisation. The transformation of the capital into “political power,” in fact, responds to the need to restore a valorising dynamic, guaranteeing the continuance of a “horizon” of value starting from the definitive crisis of the law of the value. Through administration, capital extends its control over the totality of social relations and, leading to the fulfilment of the passage from formal subsumption to real subsumption, it subdues the entire sphere of reproduction, the totality of the social relationships, to the logic of profit:

This is the *State-based-on-Income-as-Revenue*, the Income-State (*Stato-rendita*) – a state of political income. The one absolute value against which all other hierarchical values must measure themselves is political power. ... From this point of view, the indifference to the value you produce is equalled by the attention paid to the extent of your faithfulness to the system. The *labour market* ... is sectioned off according to the hierarchical values advanced by the system.²⁵

²⁴ Negri 2005, p. 71.

²⁵ Negri 2005, pp. 248-49.

The value, reduced to “differential income”, to an expression of the political hierarchization of the abstract social labour, definitively loses all “objective measurement,” all economic meaning, all historical necessity, every progressive function, becoming exclusively an instrument of domination, the power of subjugating socially productive force to capital. In short, value becomes an “image of profit,” an “illusion” of value, a “pure mystification” produced through the command:

But, politically, this mystification lives on! It does so because this is the only way for total capital to succeed in re-proposing a rule of domination and power as a “relation with itself”, to posit itself as “subject of the circle of profit.” ... The only form of commodity production left to capital is the form of production in accordance with an empty logic of the persistence of its domination.²⁶

But, according to Negri this transformation of capital into a “power of mystification,” a force that submits the totality of social relations to the logic of profit, rather than managing to “free” the capital from the antagonistic relationship with productive work, instead imposes the recomposition of the antagonist political subject on a new social plan – the passage from the mass worker to the social worker – extending the class struggle to the totality of society relations. In short, the metamorphism of capital necessarily implies a parallel metamorphism of workers’ subjectivity and the constitution of a new political subject so that, in the absence of any economic necessity based on a dialectic of capital and wage-labour, it is characterized by its complete independence: *‘Productive force becomes divorced from capital,’*²⁷ it refuses all mediation, organizes corporate production and reproduction independently and this makes the passage from “work-force to invention-power”.

²⁶ Negri 2005, p. 73.

²⁷ Negri 2005, p. 265.

We define invention—power as a of the class to nourish the process of proletarian self—valorization in the most complete antagonistic independence; the capacity to found this innovative independence on the basis of abstract intellectual energy as a specific productive force (in an increasingly exclusive manner).²⁸

The processes of self-valorisation of class, the “creative independence” of social labour, obliging the capital to continually pursue the productive forces, to submit them to the logic of the command, constitute an imminent factor of destabilization and destructuring of capitalistic command. The entire sphere of reproduction thus becomes an *‘open field of struggle between the two classes, exactly like the terrain of production.’*²⁹ the battlefield where irreconcilable forces are in combat; the space of a permanent civil war.

3.2. *The immanentization of the political and the ideological*

The Italian workerist theory of the Planner-State already represented a first problematisation of the Marxian topography: considering the relationship of production as an immediately antagonistic relationship, the theory of the Planner-State in effect starts a movement of “immanentization” of the political.

This is a mode of exposition which attacks and reverses our habitual way of seeing the development of Marx’s thought ... Here the assumption of the command in all the intensity of its general political functioning is, on the contrary, primary. How can one be surprised by this? All that we have seen up to this point concerning the motivations and incitements which are at the origin of the *Grundrisse* and of their methodological foundation are conducive to making the political element the center of the analysis.³⁰

²⁸ Negri 2005, p. 268.

²⁹ Negri 2005, p. 197.

³⁰ Negri 1991, p. 61.

The recognition of the structural function of the political relationship however, in the theorization of the Planner-State, does not completely dissolve the distinction of structure and superstructure: the Keynesian project of “dynamic equilibrium” between the classes necessarily demanded the persistence of the separation of capital and State, of economic power and political power. The latter, in fact, only by virtue of its transcendence with respect to the class antagonists, could guarantee the conditions of capitalist reproduction.

The Negrian theorization of the Crisis-State, dissolving this latter opposition of economic power and political power, marks the definitive dissolution of the Marxist topography. The capital, in fact, identifies itself completely with the State, losing its economic connotation and transforming itself into a dominating political force. At the same time, the State identifies itself *tout court* with capital since, once its traditional transcendence is lost, and it is transformed into an immanent power, capable of establishing control over the totality of social relationships. In short, Crisis-State means precisely the complete realization of the identification between the political and the economic, between production and reproduction, thus the definitive dissolution of the Marxian topography: the superstructure loses all independence and becomes a ‘latency that must be reduced to the presence of valorisation at the base [structural valorisation];’³¹ transforming the political into a structural element, into a force that makes possible to process of capitalistic valorisation.³²

In short, the Negrian theorization of the Crisis-State dissolves the Marxian distinction between the economic structure and the legal-political superstructure, developing a new representation of society as a totality of the multiple relations of force that develop on a plane of absolute immanence.

³¹ Negri 2005, p. 212.

³² On the question of this complete identification of the political with the structural, see Bologna 1997.

4. Proximity in difference

The consideration of the relations of production not only as economic relations but always also political-ideological relations, in both Althusser and in Negri, expands the concept of “structure” to the entire sphere of social relations, to the totality of political and ideological dynamics that allow the effective affirmation of the capitalist relation of production. At the same time, for both authors, capital, having lost its traditional “economic physiognomy”, appears to be a political-ideological power essentially useful to the continual reproduction of a mystifying logic.

Would it therefore be fair to conclude that Negri and Althusser, starting from two completely different perspectives, from two radically diverse interpretations of Marx’s work arrive, through their considerations on the “crisis of Marxism,” at a “convergence,” establishing a common theoretical-political ground for re-founding revolutionary theory?

In reality, the approximation of the two theoretical *dispositifs* is never translated into full identification, but is formed from an essential and persistent heterogeneity of the two temporal conceptions.

In Althusser, as we have seen, the primary need is to *reformulate* the relation of structure and superstructure, in order to overcome the idealist position of an abstract economic base, without renouncing the fundamental postulate of the separateness of the State, the *conditio sine qua non* of the reproduction of capitalistic relations of production. The decisive characteristic of this reformulation is the inversion of the relationship between structure and superstructure: it is no longer a question of “deducing” the political-ideological dimension from the economic relationships; but rather considering the totality of social relationships as an effective condition of capitalist relations of production. It is no longer a question of thinking reproduction by starting with

production, but of considering production starting with and as part of reproduction.

The fundamental consequences of this new representation of the topography seem to be basically three:

- 1) Mystification becomes the fundamental productive force of the capital, the element that makes its historical existence possible,³³ realizing the conditions of its reproduction.
- 2) The *historical continuum*, consequently, loses any emancipatory potential, appearing as the basis for the “eternal return to the equal,” the place of the indefinite reproduction of the same mystifying logic.
- 3) The revolution, finally, loses every link with the historical future; it is configured as the “opposite to history,” as “an economic breakdown,” an “interruption” of the *continuum* and creation of an absolute discontinuity.³⁴

In short, for Althusser, the mystifying power of the State, inasmuch as it is a force for the repression of the antagonism (the power of forgetting social conflictuality) makes possible the reproduction of the relationships of production, representing the principle historical force in an “a-historical” conception of history as the eternal reproduction of the same mystifying logic. At the same time, revolution is configured essentially as a process of destruction of the fetishist nexus of production-reproduction, structure-superstructure. The opening of a conjuncture that, to be the place of the interruption of ideological time and the emergence of a metahistorical dimension, allows the emergence of widespread antagonism at every social

³³ See Pardi 2006, and 2008.

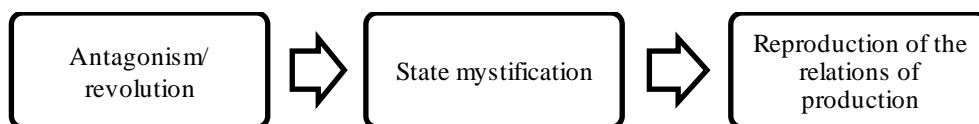
³⁴ The theories presented by Pardi (2006, and 2008) help to clarify the relation between revolutionary conjuncture and reproduction of the relations of production: while the latter is the “historical power” that qualifies the historical continuum as “eternal return” of an identical mystifying dynamic, the revolutionary conjuncture, appears to be precisely dissolution of time (of the mystifying-reproductive dynamics) and confirmations of the primacy of spatiality (emergence of the constitutive antagonism of the many social relationships).

level, establishing the possibility of a radical transformation of the entire signifying context; of the determination of new possible horizons of meaning.

The Negrian *dissolution* of topography, through the complete immanentization of the superstructural elements, highlights a view of the historical continuum that is radically different: to be the place of the action of the antagonistic subjectivity, history presents itself as “discontinuous development:” as progressive realization of the historical tendencies through the succession of “temporal fractures,” “epochal breakthroughs.” The mystifying power of capital, at the same time, far from representing a historical force, rather expresses the movement of subsumption of the productive social forces to a capital that continually “blocks” their independent development, interrupting the historical creativity of the social “force-invention.” The revolution, finally, is configured only as historical power: revolutionary *praxis* is the constitutive process of the power of social labor: autonomous production and reproduction of the society.

We can therefore conclude that the reduction of capital to power of mystification, by virtue of two different views of temporality, translates into two representations of capitalism that are “similar”, but essentially “different”.

In Althusser, capital, inasmuch as it is power of mystification, is a historical force that, dissolving the constitutive antagonism of the relations of production, restores a pacified image of the capitalist society, allowing its reproduction. The revolution, at the same time, is seen as the emergence of the antagonism that, by upsetting the mystifying-reproductive dynamics, opens a revolutionary conjuncture.



In Negri, on the contrary, capital, having lost every historical function is configured essentially and exclusively as a generator of antagonism, an obstacle to the definitive liberation of socialized productive forces. At the

same time, revolution is defined as an autonomous constitutive movement of the productive forces:



These brief diagrams, although they undoubtedly simplify the two dispositifs, immediately show the essential difference between them, and therefore the fulcrum of their possible problematic comparison: in the first place, the movement of the revolution beyond capitalist development and the consequent reduction of capitalism to “objective mystification” represent the common nucleus of the two theories.

Further, antagonism is situated differently in the two perspectives: in Negri it appears as the product of a mystification: it is the capitalist submission of the social productive forces to the command that in transforming the autonomous ontological power that exists in resistance to capital generates antagonism. In Althusser, in contrast, (and here he seems more workerist [*operaista*] than Negri) antagonism is configured as the presupposition of mystification: class struggle, the core of capitalist society, is the material that the state shapes as it transforms the “politico-antagonistic” into an “ideologico-juridical” relation.

Finally, “the independence of productive forces” and “social pacification” represent the “heterogeneous terms” belonging to only one of the two schemes.

Our hypothesis is that these “heterogeneous terms” reciprocally reveal the “aporetical” places of the two theoretical points of view, which will remain in the two different “ontological proposals.”³⁵

Emancipation, for Negri as for Althusser, freed of any possible dialectic with capital, stands on a discontinuous terrain, *beyond* the limits of Marx, *beyond* the relationships of capitalist production, *beyond* the ontical plane of the

³⁵ Cfr. Althusser 2006; Negri 2000.

relationships between production and exploitation. In this manner, the “ontological breakthrough”, the foundation of the revolutionary theory on a terrain separated from the plane of the historical dialectic, appears to be the only way to constitute an adequate revolutionary theory of contemporaneity.

However, in Althusser the exclusion of any hypothesis of independence of the productive forces, makes it necessary to think of revolution as dissolution of the reproductive dynamics and emergence of antagonism. This latter appears to be the antithesis of the processes of historicizing; it is opposed to history, and marks the interruption of “ideological time.”

How then, can the liberating power expressed in the conjunctural explosion of antagonism spread historically and also affirm itself as an immanent logic of reproductive processes? How can conjuncture and history, event and process be joined?

In Negri’s theory, the answer to this question is given immediately: it is impossible to identify *tout court*, as Althusser does, reproduction and mystification, since the autonomy of the productive forces expresses the possibility of a reproductive dynamic of democratic processes and reveals the intrinsic historicity of communism.

At the same time, however, Negri sees historical effectiveness as the result of a process of submission of the productive forces to capital that on the one hand blocks history, and on the other generates widespread antagonism throughout society. The historical future therefore presents itself as permanent civil war between the two irreconcilable subjectivities: the subjectivity of capital *versus* the subjectivity of the worker. How then can we explain, starting from these two assumptions, the persistent homologating power of capital? Its capacity, starting from the late 1970s and the early 1980s, to dissolve the many forms of antagonistic subjectivity, imposing once again its persistent and undeniable domination? Evidently, following Althusser, the concept of ideological mystification cannot be reduced *tout court* to the concept

of valorisation, implying a *surplus* of transcendence, the persistence of a “superstructural factor” inherent to its function of removal of social antagonisms.

The comparison between Negri and Althusser, starting with the specific question of the limits of the Marxian topography therefore reveals, between the independence of the productive forces and the ideological power of capital, an “aporetic complementarity” between the two theoretical perspectives, that represents the terrain on which it will be possible to extend the comparison between the two “ontological devices:” aleatory materialism *versus* constituent ontology.

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